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Risk Media Campaigns and Public Engagement

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For the division: Environment, Science and Risk Communication

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Abstract

Risk campaigns are becoming increasingly important as arenas for public engagement in matters of risk, health and technology. This is also true in a Scandinavian context where risk management issues tend to be less conflictual in comparison with the framing of risk issues in, for instance, Great Britain and the US. It can, therefore, be argued that the depoliticisation of risk is of particular importance to risk matters as these become increasingly framed as a matter of improved management and better accumulation of scientific and statistical knowledge.

The paper explores how the European horsemeat scandal unfolds in the media. While the presence of horsemeat in food products labelled to contain 100% beef in itself hardly presents a threat to human health, the scandal is framed on the background of other food safety cases involving meat unfit for human consumption. It, therefore, invokes speculations of risk, trust and a lack of control over modern food production processes on the background of a very distinct historical context in Denmark specifically and Europe more generally.

The analysis is conducted on the basis of a 4-month sample of reports and articles in all Danish nationwide newspapers. The approach combines a quantitative content analysis of the public debate and newspaper reporting during this period with a qualitative study of selected material. The qualitative analysis will in particular deploy a discursive analytical strategy in order to explore the role of media risk campaigns in engaging public opinion and opening a space for the debate about public trust in food and food risk management.

Background

In the light of risk management as an institutional and administrative practice becoming increasingly depoliticised, it is tempting to look towards risk campaigns as they take place in the media as the main arena for public engagement in matters of risk, health and technology (Burgess 2010: 71). The importance of the public sphere, and the media in particular, as a site for democratic contestation and for citizen engagement is therefore an obvious focus of research (Allen 2002). This point is explored through a case study of the recent 'horsemeat scandal' that swept across Europe in the winter and spring of 2013.

While the issue of health was contentious in the debate about horsemeat, the media discourse that emerged certainly evoked issues of consumer confidence and trust in modern food production and distribution systems and system of regulation of these. Moreover, it led to a more general debate about the meaning of food, what we eat and why. While the presence of horsemeat in food products labelled to contain only beef in itself hardly presents a threat to human health, the scandal is framed on the background of other food safety cases involving meat unfit for human consumption. It, therefore, invokes speculations of risk, trust and a lack of control over modern food production processes on the background of a very distinct historical context in Denmark specifically and Europe more generally. The question of how food crises are represented in the media therefore is brought to the forefront.

One possible answer to this question is brought forward by an approach to media risk reporting that emphasises the social amplification of risk. The focus is thus on how particular risk issues that resonate with public concerns are emphasised while others, presumed by news editors and journalists to be of less interest to the public, are ignored or down-played (Kasperson et al 2003). This view tends to resonate with popular ideas about how risks are portrayed in media campaigns as emphasising conflict and scandalise particular 'mediagenic' risks (Anderson 1997). It is believed that media representations of food crises become biased and in some form or other misrepresent the 'real' risk involved. The horsemeat scandal certainly had elements of being a mediagenic case with a high degree of newsworthiness. However, a perspective emphasising the amplification of the issue at stake risks neglecting the fact that media representations of crises and risks play a role in the process whereby an issue is constituted as a crisis and/or a risk in the first place.

The focus of this paper is, therefore, not on how a food crisis is distorted in terms of the 'real' crisis and the 'real' risk that is 'out there'. It takes the perspective of media representations at face value as one amongst other competing perspectives on how a

crisis can be framed. If media representations are seen as discourses, it moreover becomes possible to examine the multiplicity of voices and discursive representations present in the media debate. The paper also seeks to provide an understanding of the underlying assumptions that are fundamental, yet often taken for granted and naturalised, involved in representations of food, risk and health in the media.

Research Questions

1. How are food crises represented in the Danish media?
2. How do these representations support and/or contest established myths of food, risk and health?

Methodological and theoretical approach

The case study is conducted on the basis of a sample of all reports and articles in two broadsheet newspapers *Politiken* and *Berlingske* and two Danish tabloid newspapers *BT* and *Ekstra Bladet* in the period 1/2 – 31/3 2013. The newspapers are chosen in order to convey the different political positions in the debate so that the critical perspective, the populist perspective and the industry perspective are covered in addition to left-right political-ideological criteria. All articles containing the word 'hestekød' (horsemeat) have been included and analysed in the study. The data is analysed as a qualitative study of the major discursive representations of food, crises, health and trust. The qualitative analysis will in particular deploy a discursive analytical strategy in order to explore the role of the media risk and health campaigning in engaging public opinion and opening a space for the debate about public trust in food and food risk management. A combination of open coding and theoretical insights into media representations of food and risks have lead to the development of the coding scheme employed in this study (Miles and Huberman 1994; Straus and Corbin 2008).

Frame/discourse	Code
Risk regulation	Managerial control
	Consumer trust
	Responsibility
	Fraud
Critical food discourse	Consuming meat
	Price/quality
	Trust

The discursive framing of food, health and risk in the horsemeat scandal draws on discourse as conceptualised by Laclau and Mouffe as articulations of meaning that form a structured totality consisting of relations of difference between moments in the discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105). Thus a discourse of food may be structured around moments such as 'nutritious', 'wholesome' and 'natural'. The moments of 'risk' and 'food safety' can only successfully be articulated in relation to food, if it co-exists with a discourse of food governance that renders the risk controllable through a system of responsibility assigning and knowledge about risks. A myth for Laclau is 'a principle of reading in a given situation' (Laclau 1990: 61). This paper works with the assumptions that risk governance can be seen as a myth of managerial control that dominates the way that food is articulated in relation to health and risk. This myth may or may not be contested in the public debate.

Seeing public engagement in discursive terms has implications for who is seen as the voices that are active in the public debate and which status these voices obtain within the media framework. The categories of 'the public' and 'the consumer' are not taken for granted. On the contrary, the definition of 'who the public are' is seen as fields of negotiation which are central to the understanding of the further negotiations of the meaning of risk, health and food in the horsemeat scandal. The partial fixation of meaning is, therefore, the point of focus in this study (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Preliminary findings

The coded material reveals the contours of a clash between what we might call a *discourse of managerial control* and a more *critical food discourse*. Both speak on behalf of the consumer and are framed as strategies to obtain, or indeed regain, consumer trust in food.

The discourse of managerial control is in many ways predominant in the media debate. Its roots can be found in the way that the horsemeat scandal initially is framed as yet another food safety issue where both the wording and the discourses drawn on are based on past experiences with BSE, Salmonella and other meat related issues that have forced the public to relate food to risk (Roslyng 2011). The horsemeat issue is therefore framed like a meat risk scandal in several respects: First, the public authorities as well as producer organisations immediately react to the scandal with assurances that any systemic faults will be found and rectified. The Danish minister for food decided on the 12th of April, the day after the possibility of horsemeat content in beef products in Danish supermarkets was raised in the media, that the Food Authorities will conduct controls on supermarkets to see whether all products suspected of containing horsemeat have been removed from the shelves (Berlingske 13/2 2013). EU ministers

for food are called to a crisis meeting. The British minister Owen Patterson uses clear crisis rhetoric: "It is absolutely shocking. It is totally unacceptable if some companied cheat the population by selling horsemeat as beef. Anybody involved in this kind of activity will be hit hard with the law" (Politiken 14/2 2013). Second, the clear emphasis on determining responsibility and thereby regaining the consumer confidence that is presumed lost through the scandal. This is done through some of the governance measures introduced in the wake of food scandals such as BSE; most notably the idea of traceability 'jord til bord' (from farm to fork), screening checks of supermarkets and correct labelling (Politiken 14/2 2013; Berlingske 15/2 2013). Risk is most directly invoked in the debate in relation to the possible use of horse medicine which is unfit for human consumption. However, the issue is very clearly framed as one that does not pose a threat to human health and rather relates to cultural issues about the acceptability in eating horses.

Risk takes a somewhat wider meaning in some of the contestations of the managerial control framing of the horsemeat scandal. We might call this the critical food discourse. It is most often expressed in letters to the editor, by independent commentators and by some NGOs. In the first instance, the discourse is challenged by citizens who are fond of horsemeat and point to the fact that it is healthy (Politiken 14/2 2013). These letters react against what they see as the hysteria of both public authorities and (other) consumers. One commentator refers to this as 'pet cannibalism' (Politiken 3/3 2013). The second, and more critical, step is to question the concept of meat itself. With reference to the quality and price of ready meals, it is pointed out that: 'the most surprising thing about the horsemeat scandal is perhaps that the ready meals contain any meat at all' (Berlingske 17/2 2013). Moreover, by European law a beef burger only has to contain a minimum of 47% meat. As predicted, this may mean that 'the era of cheap food is over' and that you get what you pay for. It also may be true, as pointed out by a Politiken journalist that the real scandal should be that 'the Danes eat like pigs' (Politiken 3/3 2013). Danish Vegetarian Association, naturally, support this perspectives by invoking the hypocrisy that disgust in horsemeat and not, for instance, veal and referring to the wider ethical and economic issues involved in overconsumption of meat (Berlingske 13/2 2013). Moreover issues of animal welfare, pork traces in beef products and its religious implications appear in connection to this.

The media debate and the media framing of the horsemeat scandal as a scandal show how a discourse on manageability of safe food is predominant in the governance of food in Denmark. However, rather than being a fixed regime, this discourse is constantly renegotiated, contested and re-confirmed in the public debate as illustrated by the critical food contestations in the debate.

Discussion and preliminary conclusion

If fraud is seen as the main cause of the scandal and blame attributed to 'Polish and Italian meat mafia gangs' (Berlingske 11/2 2013), the issue actually constitutes a minimal threat to the managerial control regime. In actual fact, as pointed out by the interest organisation Food and Agriculture, it 'shows that the system works' (Politiken 3/3 2013) as the origins of the dodgy meat was traceable and the fraud was revealed. While this, of course, is a statement that coincides with the interests of the organisations making the statement, it still shows how the framing of the issue in terms of fraud will not constitute a threat to the logic of the discourse of managerial control. In some way it rather justifies the presence of a fine masked control mechanism.

The critical food discourse, on the other hand, provides a clear threat to the principles of food governance in Denmark and the EU. The current food regime is largely built on the idea of cheap and plentiful food and questioning the wholesomeness of the meat – or even whether meat is indeed meat – puts the manageability of food risks to question. The risk becomes not just a matter of medicine traces in horses unfit for human consumption but it questions the level of meat quality in Denmark (and beyond) in general and in particular the meat used on ready meals.

The issues of 'consumer trust' and the 'public interest' are constantly referred to in the media from all the different positions in the debate. It is, however, not clear who speaks on behalf of the public. The public authorities, which will crack down hard on fraud, presume to do so for the public good and to reinstate consumer confidence. Meanwhile, the 'consumer voices' in the debate call for more consumption of horsemeat due to it being 'healthy and tasty'. It is therefore, not clear who speaks on behalf of the consumer and the public good. 'Consumer trust' in many ways acts as an empty signifier in the debate (Laclau 1990) as it becomes devoid of meaning while it at the same time centres the discourse. It is exactly in defining a space within which one can speak on behalf of the consumer, and define this as the general public interest, that the potential for the discourse of managerial control lies.

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